

# 2004 REPORT OF THE GIFTED ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The Gifted Advisory Committee met eight times during the 2003-2004 school year. Parent member Randy Young served as the chairman of the committee, parent member Nancy Scott served as secretary, and Alix Smith was the staff liaison. The 2004 report addresses the progress made on our recommendations from 2003, and shares new and continued recommendations for 2004-2005.

## COMMENDATIONS:

The Gifted Advisory Committee (GAC) is pleased that each of our recommendations from 2003 has been addressed or implemented to some degree:

- At the high school level, Advanced Placement courses have been successfully added, including A.P. World History and A.P. Environmental Science. Students who choose to remain in the regular high school program have the opportunity to take as many A.P./dual enrollment courses as Commonwealth Governor's School students.
- A monthly seminar program for ninth graders has been successfully instituted at Brooke Point High School this year. There are plans to add a tenth grade component at Brooke Point and to institute a "lunchtime seminar" at North Stafford High School for next year. We hope that the seminar concept will continue to develop in all of the high schools in the county as it provides gifted students an opportunity to meet as a group and to discuss important topics of interest to them.
- At the middle school level, an extended English 8 curriculum is being developed for implementation in 2004-2005. Our expectation is that this class will be available in all six middle schools. The Stafford Middle School model was so successful this year that it contributed to more SMS students applying to and being accepted in the Commonwealth Governor's School.
- Middle school principals have been supportive in mandating Focus training for all of their teachers who work with gifted students.
- At the elementary level, one additional resource teacher was hired for 2003-2004, which allowed each resource teacher to once again serve two schools, rather than three.
- A School Board commitment to moving systematically toward one resource teacher per elementary school was apparent in the 2004-2005 budget, which allows for 2-3 resource teachers to be added for the 2004-2005 school year.
- An "expedited" assessment was developed and implemented to shorten the time necessary to identify and serve gifted transfer students from sixty school days to approximately fifteen (once the student's records are received.)
- The elementary resource teachers are continuing to develop strategies to shorten the entire identification process as much as possible within the state guidelines.
- A sub-committee of the GAC has researched various models for serving gifted students, and hopes to survey parents of gifted students to determine their interests. Results will be used to determine future recommendations.

We appreciate the support of the School Board, Superintendent, Instructional and school-based administrators, and the Focus staff for implementing our recommendations.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** The GAC hopes that the progress made to serve and support gifted students in our schools will continue. Our specific recommendations for 2004 are:

***1. Develop a staffing formula that includes at least one gifted resource specialist per school.***

For the first time in the history of gifted services in Stafford, resource staffing has been threatened by the budget concerns this year. We understand that identification of gifted students and differentiation of instruction for those students are required by the state of Virginia. We know that Stafford County receives some financial aid from the state to help meet those requirements. We also understand that specific staffing for gifted education is not required by the Standards of Accreditation. We want to point out, however, that the education of gifted children has already been hurt by the school system's focus (albeit necessary) on teaching the Standards of Learning and passing the SOL tests. Your number one goal is to "provide educational excellence through instruction that establishes high expectations for *all* students yet recognizes the unique needs of each learner." While mastery of the Standards of Learning may be a "high expectation" for most students, it is not a high enough expectation for gifted students. These students need each and every one of their teachers to differentiate their curricula, instructional strategies, and expectations so that there is appropriate challenge. The Gifted Plan cannot be considered fully implemented until that is the case. It requires a continued commitment by the School Board and Superintendent and the accountability of every school administrator and every teacher. Cutting properly endorsed gifted resource staff should not even be a consideration unless and until there is suitable accountability county-wide for appropriately differentiated instruction for gifted students. Differentiation should not be a "hit or miss" proposition, depending on the classroom teacher(s) or school to which student is assigned each year.

We believe that gifted specialists provide an invaluable service not only to gifted students but to classroom teachers and the general population of students. Staffing must continue to keep up with the increasing student population. The concept of a staffing formula was discussed by the superintendent at one of our meetings this year. The size of the school student body, the number of students identified as needing services, and the number of referrals should factor into that formula. It is recognized that such a formula could indicate the need for more than one resource teacher in some high population facilities.

***2. Consider re-instituting standardized achievement testing at a minimum of two grade levels.***

The GAC is disturbed by the state's decision to cease funding of the Stanford 9 Achievement Tests and Stafford County's decision to cease administration of any nationally normed achievement tests. Currently, achievement test scores are required in a variety of ways, including:

- Screening for the pool of students potentially in need of gifted services
- Identification of gifted students, particularly in specific academic areas

- Selection process for Commonwealth Governor's School and Summer Residential Governor's Schools
- Finding students in grades 5-8 who qualify for the Johns Hopkins Talent Search
- Applications for several summer programs such as the UVA Summer Enrichment Program

But more importantly, nationally normed achievement tests provide a method of comparing individual students with other students in the nation, rather than just with other students in Virginia. The SOL tests have a ceiling of 600, and many of our brightest students meet that. We have no method of measuring how much more they know.

The Department of Gifted Services has purchased some achievement tests to administer as needed, but the effect is to add testing time to resource teachers already strapped for instructional time, and to eliminate achievement test scores as a method of screening entire grade levels of students for possible gifted assessment.

The GAC encourages the school division to analyze and evaluate the benefits and costs of doing standardized achievement testing at two grade levels. If students were tested at 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades, for example, most of the current needs for test scores would be addressed.

***3. Continue development of a middle school Extended English curriculum and begin work designing curriculum extensions in social studies and science that encompass middle school through grade 10.***

The GAC believes that accelerated math options in middle school have been very important in addressing the challenge needed by our gifted student population. We believe that the extended English concept which will be implemented at the eighth grade level in 2004-2005 will be a successful intervention as well and will result in a higher number of SOL scores in the Advanced Proficient range. Our hope is that the school system will continue to move forward in developing curriculum extensions for English in 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades, and for science and social studies as well. When the middle school expectations are raised, it will be necessary to increase the level of challenge in the high school through additional "honors" level courses or other curriculum extensions at the ninth and tenth grade levels. The GAC is not advocating tracking or grouping for the sake of grouping. We simply want our children to be afforded a challenging curriculum in all subjects. We do not want them to spend their academic lives viewed only as peer tutors or role models. Nor do we want them to become complacent and lazy and incapable of dealing with challenges when they do come.

***4. Continue research into alternative delivery methods for services for elementary students.***

The GAC remains committed to augmenting elementary gifted services. The committee is exploring alternative methods of providing elementary gifted services, including centers that would bring students from multiple schools together. Our hope is to provide data to the School Board that either supports or does not support a concept, so that a decision and

commitment whether to change the approach could be determined in time to write the 2006 gifted plan. Once we know the priorities of parents of gifted students, the GAC plans to analyze financial impact on staffing and transportation, as well as the instructional impact on gifted students.

***5. Plan now to add a third site of The Commonwealth Governor's School in Stafford in 2005-2006.***

In 2004, a total of 133 eighth grade students applied for The Commonwealth Governor's School. Only 55 students could be accommodated at the Stafford and Colonial Forge sites. Staff estimates that possibly 35 more students could have been successful in the program. The GAC urges the Superintendent and School Board to begin planning now for an additional site for the Commonwealth Governor's School, to open in the fall of 2005. With a new high school under construction and set to open in 2005, space should become available at North Stafford for a site at that time.

This report is respectfully submitted to the Superintendent and School Board by the Gifted Advisory Committee of the Stafford County Public Schools.